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SUBJECT: SADC, OPPOSITION AND GOVERNMENT MEETINGS ON POLITICAL SITUATION MARCH 16 - 19, 2007

REF: (A) MASERU 160 (B) MASERU 149

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CLASSIFIED BY: June Carter Perry, Ambassador, EXEC , STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Over the past three and a half days, Ambassador Perry has met with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Executive Secretary and his senior staff, the diplomatic corps and all leaders of the opposition parties concerning the current political crisis and stay-away occurring in Lesotho. The purpose of the March 18 meeting with SADC was to seek their facilitation/mediation with the opposition parties to avert a stay-away which had been called for March 19-21. The purpose of the stay-way in terms of actual objectives was not clear and a later meeting on March 18 with all leaders of the opposition parties did not shed further light on their proposed action. The purpose, as discussed with the diplomatic community over the past several days, is to protest what they perceive as the lack of dialogue with the ruling Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) government and the allocation of proportional seats in Parliament, but expected results remain unspecified. Donors, beginning with a March 16 meeting, have emphasized to the opposition that a stay-away would only hurt Basotho workers at the lowest level who desperately need their jobs and would not accomplish the political resolution desired; that could only be done through established procedures. We learned early March 19 that the opposition had met with the SADC Executive Secretary late on the day before and had been asked by SADC to call off the stay-away. Negotiations would take time and there is no clear positive result that could come from potentially violent reactions during the stay-way. Donors found disturbing All Basotho Convention (ABC) Leader Thomas Thabane's refusal to call off the strike, and in also the intent of opposition supporters to intimidate public transport drivers as well as private taxi owners. We have, in various discussions, recommended that the Government of Lesotho (GOL) reach out to the men and women on the street through a public statement indicating its concern for service delivery as well as its openness and willingness for dialogue with various sectors of the Basotho population, including the opposition. The promises made by ABC Thabane that he would call for peace and stability have not proven true as tires have been burned on various streets around Maseru, rocks thrown at numerous individuals, and taxi drivers taken from their burning vehicles and subsequently beaten. Post convened an Emergency Action Committee (EAC) (septel) and continues to update American citizens and mission staff of the situation.

Donors have been promised a briefing by the SADC Executive Secretary concerning the organizations negotiations on the

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matter. End Summary.

SADC Promised to Listen

¶2. (C) During the March 19 meeting with Dr. Tomaz Salomao, Executive Secretary of SADC, his Deputy and other SADC officials, we brought to his attention the fact that there are, according to opposition leaders, unresolved issues following the February 2007 election according to opposition leaders. We expressed our concern that peace and stability reign in order for the people of Lesotho to carry out their normal activities and for the international community to effectively continue its development efforts in all sectors. I specifically raised the question of what the opposition could define as an end result or objective of a stay-away since their questions seemed to center around the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) representational system in Parliament and the alliance between the LCD and the National Independent Party (the NIP). We further discussed a potential role for SADC to stall the stay-away and to act as a mediating body between the government and the opposition. Dr. Salomao summarized the key points and said that he would raise with the opposition leaders that day, March 19, this question of what could be achieved by a stay-away which could in fact turn violent. (Comment: The leader of the Monarchist Freedom Party had told the diplomatic community several week ago that a stay-away equaled "free shopping" (that is, a looting of stores and businesses throughout the country). Dr. Salomao also raised the question of striking in Maseru City and Maseru District, and learned that, in fact, opposition parties had won in that urban area as well as other towns in the country, but remained a minority party. He asked if this situation might be contained and upon learning that it is believed it could -- with the proper intervention -- said that he would also raise this with the opposition parties.

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The Obstinate Opposition

¶3. (C) Late on Sunday, March 18, opposition party leaders, who had requested a meeting with the diplomatic corps to air their grievances, convened with Ambassadors from the United States, China and Ireland as well as the Charge of the South African High Commission, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) representative and the European Union (EU) Head of Delegation. Thomas Thabane took the lead in making a presentation to the international group and said that he was concerned that the opposition had not had a dialogue with the government and that questions remained about the MMP and particularly the fact that no senators had been appointed from parties other than the LCD under the cover of the NIP. He stated that the Minister of Tourism, Mrs. Nts'inyi, who had lost her constituency had been appointed a Senator since she was on the NIP list and had also been appointed as Minister (a fact he found disturbing and one that has been discussed freely in the press). When members of the donor community pressed the opposition leaders further about the grievances, Dr. Raditapole (member of parliament) and General Lekhanya (Basotho National Party) stated they felt the purpose of the MMP, which is to allow representation by smaller political parties, had been misused by the LCD and they also blamed the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) for accepting a list of NIP candidates that had not been blessed by the 90 plus year old NIP leader, Mr. Manyeli, who was also present at this meeting. General Lekhanya then held up a sheet of paper, a chart which had been drawn up by the EU Head of Delegation, showing what the actual proportional representation should have been. The EU representative responded strongly to this and stated that his chart was strictly hypothetical and would not

stand up in a court of law. (Comment: The role of the EU both in the pre-electoral and post-electoral period has been somewhat puzzling since the representative has seemed to make an effort to demonstrate support of ABC Leader Thabane. Thabane had been invited by the EU, without consulting other members of the donor community, to a Chief of Mission (COM) breakfast meeting at his home several weeks ago. The EU member had also been specifically asked by the Irish Ambassador not to wear a yellow tie, the symbol of the ABC party, to the opening of Parliament, since he felt this could be inflammatory and partisan. However, the Head of the EU not only wore a yellow tie, but a yellow suit as well to the March 15 opening of Parliament. End Comment)

Results?

¶4. (C) During the March 18 meeting with opposition leaders, I specifically asked Thabane what he expected to achieve with a stay-away. It would only hurt the people most in need not only of development aid but the poorest of the poor who needed their jobs. He never fully responded to this, but said it was too late to call off the strike. I said that all he had to do was go on the radio and make a statement, as he had previously promised the diplomatic corps he would do, to urge peace and stability. Thabane said in turn that his followers wanted to take to the streets of Maseru, and in order to appease them, he had agreed to a stay-away. The UNDP representative also tried to eek out of Thabane the specific objectives of the stay-away and Thabane simply said this was "a part of our strategy." Throughout this discussion, none of the leaders of the opposition seemed to demonstrate any concern for the impact such action would have on the citizenry. The various leaders did say that the GOL Minister of Communications had been on the radio earlier Sunday to say that workers were to report as usual and that transportation drivers who did not carry out their duties would have their permits rescinded. Thabane then demanded to be on the radio saying that he must have equal time, and in his broadcast, urged people to continue with the stay-away as planned. After this discussion, the donors repeated the importance of dialogue, peace and security for the good of the country. Thabane and monarchist opposition leader Malepo insisted that "they are trying to kill us and we will not be insulted." They did confirm that they would meet the SADC Secretariat following their meeting with the international

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community representatives.

Donor/Ministerial Dialogue

¶5. (C) It was agreed among the donor representatives that any further information garnered from various sources would be shared. Each mission had made provisions for transportation of its employees, if it were safe to come to work on Monday, March 19. In a conversation with Lesotho's SADC Chair, Finance Minister Timothy Thahane, on March 19, the U.S. Ambassador

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learned that the SADC Executive Secretary had briefed him both on his meeting with us as well as his meeting with the opposition leaders. According to Thahane, Dr. Salamao stated that he also had raised very firmly with the opposition leaders what they hoped to achieve in a stay-away, an action which could result in instability. He did not receive an answer, just as the diplomatic corps did not receive an answer. Some citizens believe ABC wants to show that it can shut down Maseru City. However, this would not achieve any objective in addressing the MMP issue nor lack of more opposition seats in the Senate. According to the Minister of Finance, the issue that the opposition was raising could not be resolved in Parliament, but by law had to go before the Independent Electoral Commission. He reported this information had been communicated to SADC. He believed that SADC could act as a facilitator to urge peace and

security and use of the legal system to resolve the question; he planned to discuss this further with Dr. Salomao.

¶6. (C) From Sunday evening, and into Monday, post has received reports that opposition followers had not received directives to cease activities and in fact had begun burning tires across the roads, spilling oil making it impossible for vehicles to proceed and throwing rocks at various individuals. There were also reports of shots being fired in two areas of the city located near the Lesotho Sun Hotel where the SADC Ministerial Council is to take place March 21-23, and where the SADC delegation has held a series of meetings. During a conversation with the Irish Ambassador, we found out that he had spoken with Minister of Civil Service Sekatle and that Minister had indicated the opposition could not use the civil service as a pawn in this stay-away. He reportedly agreed that the dialogue should take place. However, according to Minister Thahane, the opposition has yet to make a request to the Prime Minister for such a meeting. The Irish Ambassador did inform Sekatle that the Diplomatic Corps had, through the former Dean (the South African High Commissioner), requested its own meeting with the Prime Minister and had not received a response. (Note: According to the South African High Commissioner, the Prime Minister at first said "No" because he was afraid the diplomatic corps was coming to present criticisms of the 2007 national elections. However, the High Commissioner explained that the meeting was for the purposes of (1) congratulating the party on its victory, and (2) to encourage dialogue with others in Parliament. End Note) Minister Sekatle did not seem to be aware that the international community had made this request, but we do not find that unique since communication between various branches of government and individuals does not always occur. Dr. Pontso Sekatle, spouse of Minister Sekatle, and herself Minister of Local Government, reportedly called the UNDP representative angrily denouncing the involvement of donors in trying to assist in the dialogue. We note that Dr. Sekatle is well known for her outbursts on many issues and do not find her statement unusual; she has regularly irritated her fellow members of Cabinet, but because of her closeness to the Prime Minister, she has been tolerated by them. Her husband, also a member of the Cabinet, is more balanced and rational in his approach to issues. Furthermore, the international community has repeatedly stressed to the GOL and opposition parties its non-interference in internal affairs, but for its desire to ensure peace, stability and the democratic process.

Post's EAC Meeting

¶7. (C) Given the situation, post held an Emergency Action Committee (EAC) meeting March 19 to review information from all sources and will follow up on its previous security and consular notices issued March 16 to alert American citizens of the situation (septel). The Ambassador is to participate in a second meeting with the SADC Executive Secretary for an update on his efforts to mediate/facilitate resolution of the stay-away and to ascertain the response from the opposition parties concerning use of the legal route to resolve their procedural questions.

¶8. (C) Comment: We reiterated in conversations today with Minister Thahane and Acting Foreign Minister Phooko the potential value of a full government statement indicating its willingness to address questions by any party members and to signal its openness to dialogue. Such action may help to calm the waters since clearly the opposition, especially the ABC and Monarchist leaders, have not followed through on their commitment to urge stability and call off the stay-away. We have heard through various sources that a number of workers did not come into town out of fear and that the taxi drivers were being intimidated, beaten and/or vehicles set aflame. The police commissioner did make a statement on the radio saying that her forces would be patrolling the streets to deal with the situation. We understand that as soon as the police put out one

fire another is started. They have, it seems, been successful in clearing the streets of oil. All U.S. Mission staff personnel who can be reached have received transportation via Embassy vehicles. Others, who have experienced road blocks or tire burnings have been told to stay out of harm's way and remain at home in order to avoid any injury. We will continue to work with the international community and SADC in hopes that the stay-away can be stopped today, particularly in light of the need for dialogue and the mid-week SADC Ministerial which one hopes will proceed peacefully. End Comment

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